

MAURA SHEEHAN



DORA:

BIG GIRLS DON'T CRY

November 12 - December 16, 1994

**University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
University at Stony Brook**

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Most of all, I wish to thank Maura Sheehan for sharing her work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Cover photo: What Sound Looks Like, 1992
Installation: black tape on wood floors

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAURA SHEEHAN

Conducted by Rhonda Cooper and Christopher Youngs

September 30, 1994

RC&CY: *At what point did you decide to become an artist?*

MS: I had a fever. I was ten years old, lying sick in bed, when my mother brought me a paint-by-number kit of a white poodle. Dutifully, I went to work overriding the little lines and instructional numbers on the canvas board and painted, instead, a rather cartoonish, yet heroic, black stallion taking a high jump with a jockey whose ponytail peeked out from under a riding cap. I remember finishing the painting as the fever broke.

RC&CY: *What role did formal education play in your formation, and why did you eventually choose to do installations as opposed to more conventional paintings or sculpture?*

MS: In art school, I studied painting producing large abstracts, but it was not until after graduating that I really wanted to broaden its scope. Rather than rent a studio and continue to paint on canvas as usual, I occupied an abandoned building and used its ruinous architectural interior as a canvas. Fundamentally, it was to take formalist painting and spatialize it, making the viewing process more experiential, more interactive, creating an immersive abstraction. Rather than seeing the painting "over there on the wall," you got to actually walk through it. I loved painting and wanted to heighten the experience of it by introducing space and real time. This studio/laboratory was a wild place, a cross between a crime scene and a color-field painting.

RC&CY: *How does the space in which you are working affect the development of your ideas? As well as the physical space, are there site-specific demographic or political considerations?*

MS: Installation for me is a direct evolutionary development right out of the tradition of painting and sculpture. But the "background" is not a wallflower; it speaks up and contributes to the experience. Rather than making a "piece," it's a place or a location. You could say the site is a musical instrument which has been tuned to its location and the ideas which create and sustain it.

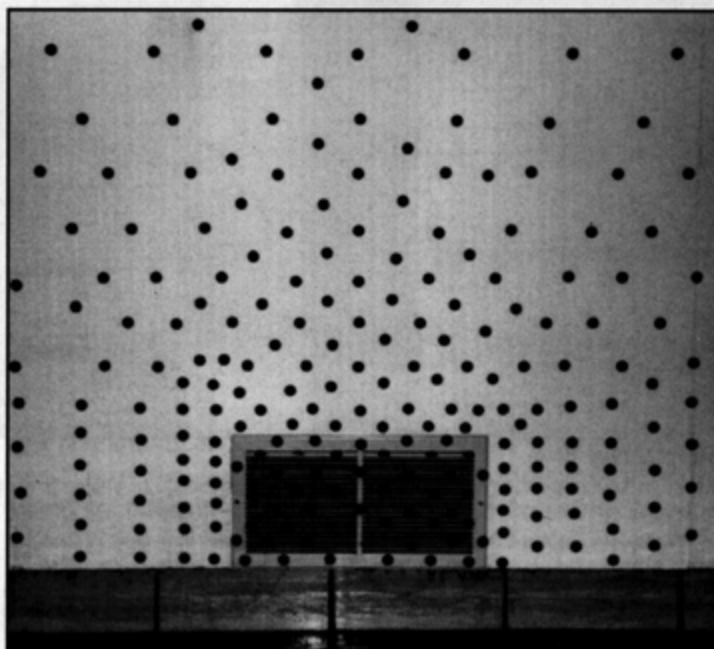
RC&CY: *Is there a central or recurrent theme that runs through your work?*

MS: The material and conceptual diversity of this work could be compared to chaos theory. At first sighting, the universe appears to be without order, reckless and uncentered. However, if one takes two steps back and readjusts the lens, there is a fine-tuned and organizational focus; a mega-pattern rooted in humanism and motivated by the reconciliation of opposites. Most of this

work attempts to present a walk-through critique of binary thinking whereby the diametric collide and fuse—not collapsing, but reinforcing each other. It's a frontal attack on dualism, whether particularizing a public/private as good/bad or as right/wrong. The space within the installations usually "act out" this assertion of oppositional reconciliation, either symbolically or viscerally, in order to clear the way for a renewed possibility, one that is unencumbered by the hierarchy of contradiction, wherein opposites simply cancel each other out rather than twist and shout.

RC&CY: *Can you walk us through the evolution of your concept for the installation at the University Art Gallery at the Staller Center, entitled, Dora: Big Girls Don't Cry?*

MS: I am using a psychoanalytical approach to address this complex and monolithic space. This is a likely strategy as, recently, I have undertaken to be psychoanalyzed myself. So here again we have a reconciliation of opposites where the private realm is interfaced with its opposite — the public gallery space. In keeping with the bold singularity of the cool-white cube of the Staller Center, I propose the introduction of a humanizing force to heat the space up and to physicalize and literalize this humanizing process by using large advertising-derived images of women. These "cut-out" billboard photos demonstrate the Freudian term of displacement by slipping from their proper place "outside" away from their authors, the "advertisers," and falling from authority to their new unauthorized use in the gallery.



Live Micro-Phone is Concealed Behind the Vent, 1993
Installation at Bard College: Avery dots on vent

In the title, Dora is Sigmund Freud's Dora, the name he gave to the subject of his *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*; hence, Big Girls Don't Cry. Freud writes of Dora's complaint that she was being used as an "object of barter." These expressive and decontextualized 'agents of advertising could also be interpreted as being exploited or self-determining. Similar questions still surround Freud's famous patient. What was she: heroine or victim? Here is where I embrace a feminist critical practice that values question, fragmentation, and flexibility of interpretation above a single critical perspective.

RC&CY: What advice could you offer to art students interested in creating their own installations?

MS: Because installation art is about ideas that occupy space, I would suggest a book I come back to again and again, a real classic: Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. In this amazing book, Bachelard demonstrates how to "read" a room as if it were a text to be deciphered, to be translated as if space were a verb to be conjugated. A more recently published collection of essays is *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina. Especially of interest is Mark Wigley's contribution, *The Housing of Gender*. These books, along with *Keys to Dora* by Jane Gallop, are sources of inspiration for the Staller Center installation, though here, rather than illustrating ideas, the focus is on demonstrating impressions while raising questions and stimulating debate.



Geography Lesson, 1992

Installation at Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University: acrylic on projection screens

MAURA SHEEHAN'S ENVIRONMENTS

by Bruce Baldwin

Appropriating the familiar, even ordinary, subject matter and manipulating it to expose our conditioned perspectives is a recurrent theme in the work of Maura Sheehan. In "Social Climbing," an installation piece Sheehan created at P.S.1 in Long Island City, billboard images that are normally seen at the side of a highway are transplanted into the gallery space. Strangely disorienting, larger-than-life faces stare eerily from between the steps of the staircase much as they had stared from the billboard for which they were made. In the context of the gallery, their two-dimensionality becomes starkly apparent, and the viewer cannot escape their mannequin-like lifelessness and unreal epidermal patina. The air-brushing that makes faces suitable for billboards paradoxically robs them of their humanity. To view a billboard at arm's reach is like sitting directly in front of a television and watching it through a magnifying glass. The illusion is broken, and all one sees is the structure of the medium on a technological level.

In "Geography Lesson," Sheehan presents maps in which the earth's poles are reversed, placing the developing nations of the Third World above North America and demonstrating how ordinary maps may condition our perception of Western hegemony. In Sheehan's painted projection screens, land masses are reduced to black silhouettes rather than the highly abstract, border-conscious representations to which we are accustomed. Without the conventional north/south orientation and without words and lines to identify land masses, the viewer is made aware of the extent to which even simple compass points have become politicized, with the North, the South, the East, and the West all evoking political ideology and agenda. Quite significant is Sheehan's witty use of projection screens as canvas. Stripped of ideological projections upon nature (itself a social construct), the maps are reduced to benign, contiguous shapes--ironically, ripe once again to become pawns for mankind. Sheehan's projection screens expose conventional maps, with their color-coded national identities, as another example of how people are conditioned to view nature from an abstract political perspective.

Sheehan's subtle humor does not detract from her messages; rather, it makes them more palatable to the viewer. Her recontextualizations manifesting our social conditioning amuse, seduce, inform, and entertain the viewer without creating the anxiety often elicited by work with moralistic overtones.

In the wittily entitled "Insulation," Sheehan juxtaposes space-age thermal fabric (used for blankets and drapery) with an old-fashioned four-poster bed to forge a visually elegant marriage of high-and low-technology. Whether on earth or in space, people seek shelter, safety, and comfort. No matter how advanced science may become and how cold and calculating scientists may be portrayed, we universally associate blankets with the womb-like sensation of safety. By juxtaposing an American Indian tee-pee, ironically mimicking the shape of a rocket capsule, with the



Trade Winds, 1991

Installation: billboard laminated onto glass shelves

four-poster, Sheehan seems to comment on the intercultural necessity of shelter and safety that spans time and space.

In all these works, there is a dream-like quality that transforms Sheehan's symbols from the personal to the universal. There is no single "correct" interpretation of Sheehan's work; rather, viewers are welcome to approach the work from their own unique perspectives. To avoid the pitfalls of employing language, an integral agent of our social conditioning that the artist intends to expose, Sheehan willfully "regresses" to symbols, much as one might use symbolic logic to avoid the interference of language in careful reasoning.

Implicit throughout Sheehan's work is that consciousness is a narrow state of mind fraught with conditioning and self-deception. The subconscious mind, on the other hand, provides a richly expressive environment unencumbered by notions of protocol and social decorum. In conceiving and constructing these counter-logical environments, Sheehan displays a mind that is capable of letting go, seeking to simulate spontaneity without relinquishing complete artistic control.





***Insulation*, 1993**

Installation in SoHo (and Venice, Italy): silver metallic "emergency blankets," four-poster bed, and rope



Social Climbing, 1992

Installation at P.S. 1 in Long Island City: billboard on stair risers

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

- 1975 FACULTY EXHIBITION
- 1976 MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS
SALVATORE ROMANO
- 1977 MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER
- 1978 LEON GOLUB
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
- 1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
- 1980 BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK II, THE STUDIO FACULTY
- 1981 ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH
- 1982 FOUR SCULPTORS
CECIL ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN McCOY
- 1983 THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW
- 1984 BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
EDWARD COUNTEY 1921-1984
CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE
- 1985 LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTINGS BY JUAN SANCHEZ/
INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR
ABSTRACT PAINTINGS REDEFINED
- 1986 KLEEGER: METAL SCULPTURE
TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
YANG YAN-PING AND ZENG SHAN-QING
EIGHT URBAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS OF
THE EAST VILLAGE
TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT
- 1987 HANS BREDER: ARCHETYPAL DIAGRAMS
MICHAEL SINGER: RITUAL SERIES RETELLINGS
JUDITH DOLNICK/ROBERT NATKIN
MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE: THE HUMANITARIAN VISION
MEL ALEXENBERG: COMPUTER ANGELS
STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA: THE WEST
- 1988 THE FACULTY SHOW '88
ROBERT WHITE: SELECTED WORKS 1947-1988
LEE KRASNER: PAINTINGS 1956-1984
EDGAR BUONAGURIO: PERMUTATION AND EVOLUTION 1974-1988
JOAN SNYDER COLLECTS JOAN SNYDER
- 1989 THE M.F.A. SHOW '89
ROBERT KUSHNER: SILENT OPERAS
HERMAN CHERRY: PAINTINGS 1984-1989
HAITIAN ART: THE GRAHAM COLLECTION
FIBER EXPLORATIONS: NEW WORK IN FIBER ART
- 1990 THE M.F.A. SHOW '90
PRINTS BY PRINTMAKERS
KIT-YIN SNYDER: ENRICO IV
FANTASTIC VOYAGES
POETIC LICENSE
- 1991 M.F.A. 1991
FREDERIC AMAT AND ROBERTO JUAREZ
ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: EPIC ART
THE MONOTYPES OF ADOLPH GOTTLIEB
THE FACULTY SHOW '91
NEW TRADITIONS: THIRTEEN HISPANIC PHOTOGRAPHERS
- 1992 M.F.A. SHOW 1992
JULIUS TOBIAS
REUBEN KADISH
CITY VIEWS
GEORGE KORAS
- 1993 MFA SHOW 1993
CONCEPTS WITH NEON
WARREN BRANDT: A RETROSPECTIVE
JOHN FERREN: IMAGES FROM NATURE
WOOD
- 1994 MFA SHOW 1994
PAPER WORKS
ROBERT RICHENBURG: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST
THE FACULTY SHOW '94